



# HONORIS CAUSA RECEPTION ADDRESS: WHY 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY ROMANIAN SOCIOLOGY AND HISTORY ARE RELEVANT TODAY

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The present text is the reception speech given by Professor Daniel Chirot at the ceremony for the awarding of the Doctor Honoris Causa degree from the University of Bucharest, which took place on October 10, 2019. Chirot evokes the significance of the scientific and social endeavour of Dimitrie Gusti in the context of the troubled history of interwar Romania.

Keywords : Daniel Chirot, Dimitrie Gusti, interwar Romania, interwar history, history of sociology



When I arrived in Romania in January 1970 from Columbia University in New York to start research for my doctoral dissertation, I knew very little about this country except for the basic facts about its history. I had studied Romanian for a semester, and was greatly helped by the fact that I was fluent in French, but I really had no idea of what life would be like in Bucharest.

I did have one important advantage. I had gotten to know Philip Mosely who was a Professor at Columbia. Mosely was hardly an ordinary professor. In 1940 he was one of the few American scholars who not only knew Russian well, but also had done extraordinary ethnographic research in Southeastern Europe and had connections with scholars throughout this region. He had traveled to Romania and gotten to know Dimitrie Gusti and Henri Stahl. In 1940 at the time of

the partition of Transylvania in which Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy had forced Romania to cede the northern half of Transylvania to Hungary, Mosely had written an influential article in *Foreign Affairs* showing that in fact the ethnic makeup of the ceded region showed it should have remained Romanian. During World War II he became a top advisor to the American State Department and to America's intelligence services. In 1946 Mosely was one of the American delegates to the post-war Paris Peace Conference that resulted in a 1947 treaty settling boundaries and claims in Southeastern Europe, including Hungary. Mosely's view that northern Transylvania should be returned to Romania helped make that the American position, and Mosely was considered a friend of Romania, even by its communist regime.

Mosely told me that in 1946 Dimitrie Gusti had come to Paris as a minor part of the Romanian delegation that included as its most important members Gheorghiu-Dej, Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu, Ion Gheorghe Maurer, and others. The sociologist Anton Golopenția, who would die in a communist prison in 1951 after being tortured during the purges of Pătrășcanu allies, was also at the Paris conference. Gusti was allowed to bring a significant number of scholarly Romanian works, including much of the product of his school of sociology. He gave those to Mosely. As a result, Columbia University's library turned out to have what is probably the best collection of Romanian material of any American university, something that, needless to say, helped me a lot. Mosely eventually returned to academic life and was one of the founders and most influential members of Russian and East European studies in American universities. It was Philip Mosely who arranged for me to be housed in Romania at the Centrul de Cercetări pentru Problemele Tineretului, which was the research arm for the youth wing of the Communist Party, and therefore connected to the Central Committee under the protection of Miron Constantinescu. In 1969, just before I left for Romania, Mosely introduced me to Corneliu Bogdan, the Romanian Ambassador to the United States. Bogdan was a prominent member of the Communist Party and a longtime leading diplomat until, in the 1980s he finally broke with Ceaușescu and became an outcast, only to join in the anti-regime resistance in 1989. But in 1969 he was still an important Romanian diplomat and he kindly told me that if I ever had any problems I should contact him.

When I got to Romania I met the Director of the Institute, Ovidiu Bădina, who as it happens was the editor of a multi-volume collection of Dimitrie Gusti's work. It was Bădina who, at my request, and on Philip Mosely's advice, introduced me to Henri Stahl. Stahl became my closest academic advisor, and a good friend despite our great age difference of 41 years. And this connection opened up for me a window into the history and accomplishments of Romanian social science. The more I learned, the more complicated, and tragic the story seemed to be.

There were of course notable historians and social analysts in Romania well before World War I. Issues of nationality and ethnicity, of the peasant problem, and of the historical legacies of a very diverse cultural heritage were at the heart of Romanian intellectual life. What was lacking was a more solid ethnographic grounding. About 80% of Romania's population was rural after World War I, and that proportion was higher still if one only took into account the ethnic Romanians as opposed to the more urbanized minorities. Yet, much about rural life was still not well studied. The period between World Wars I and II changed that. It was Dimitrie Gusti who established and nurtured a distinctive School of Romanian Sociology.

Gusti's contributions are well known and much has been written about him and his work. Combined with the increasingly sophisticated ability to collect good statistics that culminated in the wonderful census of 1930, the result was that Romanian social science was quite advanced by 1940, more so than one would have expected of a country that was still one of the poorest in Europe. It would have become more prominent if the World Congress of the International Institute of Sociology had had its planned meeting in Bucharest in 1939. But the war intervened and it was cancelled.

What made Gusti distinctive was that he was tolerant of a variety of political views at a time, in the 1930s, when politics was increasingly bitter and deeply divided. He accepted having a young Communist working with his group, Miron Constantinescu. He accepted an Iron Guard ideologue named Traian Herseni who wrote praises of the Legion. Herseni went from doing interesting rural research to writing increasingly anti-Semitic, ultra-nationalist propaganda. Stahl, on the other hand, was a moderate Marxist social democrat who had a far more benign political outlook and was also the most original and skilled rural sociologist in the Gusti group.

Gusti's work, his access to financial support, and his ability to protect various students, at least until everything got worse after 1939, depended in part on his academic prestige. But it did not hurt that his wife was the cousin of the notorious Magda Lupescu, mistress, and eventually in exile wife of King Carol the Second. Carol made sure that Gusti received ample funding, and Gusti reciprocated by being loyal to Carol's autocratic rule. This did not prevent Gusti from promoting a rigorously objective, non-ideological kind of field research that produced a large number of publications that remain essential today for anyone who wants to study inter-war Romanian rural society. Gusti himself died in 1955, but in 1970 Henri Stahl and his wife introduced me to Gusti's widow, a dignified old lady who was in a sense, as were many other people I met then, a kind of living window into the elite of a very different past.

As a passing note I might add that I also got to know Traian Herseni, who, after a fairly short period in prison was taken out to help ghost write, and then write under his own name some interesting sociology but also propagandistic work in favor of communism. In an unguarded moment he once told me that in the past he used to write praises of Căpitanul, that is, Codreanu. Now, in 1970, he told me he still wrote some similar praises, but of Ceaușescu. It's not that different after all, he said. Then he was obviously sorry he had said that because he was cautious about revealing his political feelings. But Herseni clearly approved of the growing ethno-nationalism and anti-Russian pronouncements of the communist regime, as did many right-wing intellectuals from the past. I need not go into any details about Herseni's views about eugenics and race. They



were awful. Though Gusti helped protect him during the period in which leading Iron Guardists were in danger in 1938, he never agreed with that aspect of Herseni's thinking.

I must say that one of my great regrets is that even though I got to know quite a number of distinguished intellectuals from that pre-war period, including, not long before he died, Petru Comarnescu, one of the few noted older Romanian intellectuals who spoke excellent English. I did not fully appreciate in 1970 how much these people represented a golden period in Romanian cultural life before a great darkness fell upon Romania and much of Europe during the late 1930s and afterward. Nor did I quite grasp how closely interrelated they all were, how well they knew each other, nor how convoluted their relationships were as they split into competing, scheming political factions. The results in their personal lives were far more dramatic than anything we American scholars have ever experienced. Imprisonment, for some torture and death, for others great success followed by disaster, and sometimes eventual rehabilitation. It is no wonder that in general they did not speak about the past, and even Stahl never told me many details. I should have done more to question these people, to write about them, and to make their work more accessible outside Romania. At least I feel I did some of that for Henri Stahl, but not nearly enough.

I am not going to try to say anything new about Henri Stahl. The excellent work of Zoltán Rostás covers that very well, and I would recommend Rostás's book, *Monografia ca utopie, Interviuuri cu Henri H. Stahl* (1985-1987), and also much of Rostás's other work. All I want to emphasize is what I found most inspiring, and what has guided me ever since even when I began to do research and write about topics outside Romania. To understand a society, whether a particular mountain village like Nerej in Vrancea, or a much larger society, or many, requires history, comparison, and a sense of the larger world. That was also the perspective of my American mentor Immanuel Wallerstein, so he and Stahl were intellectually quite compatible. Eventually Wallerstein published a good article by Stahl in the journal Wallerstein's center put out, and he arranged to publish my translation of one of Stahl's best books with Cambridge University Press.

This was what Stahl had written in French, *Les anciennes communautés villageoises roumaines; asservissement et pénétration capitaliste*, or in the English translation, *Traditional Romanian Village Communities: The Transition from the Communal to the Capitalist Mode of Production in the Danube Region*. This book was Stahl's summary of his great three volume work published from 1958 to 1965, *Contribuții la studiul satelor devălmașe românești*. I'm happy to note that this was reprinted in a new edition with funding from the Soros Foundation in 1998.

Stahl was eventually more influenced by the French

historical school of Annales and particularly by the work of its founder, Marc Bloch, than by the German philosophical tradition that was so current in the 1930s. Detailed knowledge of agrarian history, some of it taken from contemporary observation of villages and farmland, could greatly contribute to an understanding of how a whole social system evolved and shaped the present, even if there had been much change. He used to tell me that what he needed was aerial pictures to recapture the landscapes of the past, but of course that was not available in communist times when he did so much of his writing on agrarian history. Now it could be, and I wonder if there are any young Romanian historians and anthropologists interested in doing such studies. Combined with the work of the Gusti group of scholars from the 1930s that could yield some new, important insights into Romanian social history. If I were starting out as a young scholar now I think that is what I would want to do.

My main point today, however, is not to go over in any detail the history of the Gusti group, or to summarize the work of Henri Stahl, or to explain how that influenced me. Rather, having introduced these topics, I want to discuss the reasons for the ultimate, deeply sad failure of that endeavor by Dimitrie Gusti and his followers to produce an empirical, objective, non-ideological kind of research in order to solve Romania's social problems. The chief of these social and economic problems in the 1920s and 1930s was the agrarian situation. After the land reform that followed World War I, too many Romanian peasants lived on small, inefficient plots of land. This did not generate enough of a surplus to invest sufficiently in industry. It created a vast reservoir of discontent ripe for exploitation by politicians. The fact that so much commerce and industry was in the hands of those not considered genuine Romanians - Jews, Greeks, Germans, Hungarians - fed xenophobia and discontent in the cities. All that led to a growth of what today we call nationalist populism, at least some of which if not all was more properly called fascism.

One need only look at the old newsreels of Iron Guard demonstrations and parades to note how much they tried to project the image of themselves as representatives of an idealized authentic peasantry. To be sure it was not only the fascists who did this as there was also the generally far more liberal National Peasant Party that also appealed to rural populism. Without knowing much about Romanian peasants Dobrogeanu-Gherea's Marxist analysis of Romanian society in 1910 had identified the agrarian situation as the most important aspect of Romanian society.

Idealization of this peasantry was a major part of Romanian nationalism, but when Gusti decided to tackle Romania's problems, he realized that glorifying a mythical peasant essence and talking about his racial excellence was not going to solve anything. The point

was never to do rural sociology just for the sake of expanding knowledge, but rather to produce studies that would guide social reform and to create social action institutions that would educate rural society and help it improve itself. Putting the peasantry at the heart of this endeavor was as much a nationalist project as that of the more idealized writings of someone like, for example, Lucian Blaga, but it was meant to be more practical by being more objective, more scientific, and more directly useful. Stahl, it is useful to remember, did not have much regard for Blaga because he thought that mystifying the nature of Romania's peasants ignored reality.

Gusti's history of combining sociological research with social action is well known, at least here in Romania. It was a noble goal, but of course it failed. Failure was preordained for reasons that are in retrospect obvious.

Romania was politically and socially too polarized in the 1930s to be able to solve its problems. Though there were elections and a sort of parliamentary democracy, the growing strength of the far right pushed King Carol into trying to create a kind of royal fascism. It was anti-democratic and autocratic, and also corrupt, certainly, but it was a kind of fake fascism, not the real thing. Preoccupied with an increasingly hazardous international situation, Carol could hardly spare any time or effort into continuing interesting social experiments. And finally, with Hitler's military victories in 1940, the royal dictatorship collapsed, and with it any serious prospects for social reform as the country was fully militarized and eventually, in 1941, entered the World War as Hitler's ally.

After the war, there was no chance that the Gusti school could be revived, much less its social experiments. In 1948 sociology was outlawed as a "bourgeois science" not worthy of state support. Henri Stahl and most of the others lost their university positions. Stahl survived with some help from Miron Constantinescu, but lived much more poorly than before. It took a long time before he was allowed to publish again, and only in the 1960s did he gradually regain his former stature. Again, he was helped by Miron Constantinescu who, after being purged by Gheorghiu-Dej was fully rehabilitated by Ceaușescu. It is a long and tortuous history that ended well for Stahl, so that by the time I met him, even though he was old, he was regularly publishing new work and had devoted students. By then sociology had been revived, and there was a growing amount of good social research.

Unfortunately, it did not last. Along with the reaction against reform initiated by Ceaușescu in the early 1970s that culminated in the degeneration of the Romanian economy in the 1980s, social research became just another political casualty. It has only been since 1990 that it has once again been revived, not only in sociology and political science but in history and all other social sciences.

The fact is that scholarship in the humanities and

social sciences is always dependent on being supported by a favorable political environment. Dictatorships, whether on the right or the left, cannot allow social and historical research to be unbiased because that might undermine their ideological legitimacy. Only a very limited, technocratic kind of social research can be permitted, and even that is subject to rigorous control in any undemocratic regime.

What happened to the Gusti school was a perfect example. It could thrive in the 1920s and early 1930s in a relatively democratic environment. It could continue for a time under Carol's dictatorship because of special circumstances, but not indefinitely. It was perverted and finally eliminated after 1940, first by the far right, then more totally by the communists. It was revived at a time of gradual liberalization of communism that reached its peak just when I arrived in Romania in 1970. Then it was gradually crushed again until the overthrow of communism.

So why is this relevant today, other than as a matter of historical curiosity? For two reasons.

One is that it is a reminder of the vulnerability of what has always been a fundamental part of the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, an Enlightenment that gained strength in the nineteenth century to create our modern world. The Enlightenment was not just a move to separate religion from science in order to gain a better understanding of the natural world. Yes, that produced the scientific revolution from which came the technologies and ever more rapid advances that have characterized the world since the late eighteenth century. But the Enlightenment also promoted the idea that science should help humanity, and that the old social systems based on hereditary privilege, on fossilized religious orthodoxy, and on the denial of individual human rights should be replaced. It was from Enlightenment social philosophy that ideas emerged to power the American as well as the French Revolution. The spread of those ideas, first throughout Europe, and then throughout the world has ever since been a fundamental part of creating fairer, more democratic societies. But that is precisely the part of the Enlightenment that has always been vulnerable to attack by political forces and ideologies that reject individual rights in favor of hereditary group rights, that reject democracy in favor of autocracy, that reject truth in favor of supposedly higher forms of dogmatism, and that ultimately seek to crush free thought.

In the crisis of the 1930s throughout the world anti, or as the liberal British philosopher Isaiah Berlin put it, counter-Enlightenment forces gained ground. Partly it was the disillusion produced by the rejection of supposedly corrupt bourgeois ways that had begun even before World War I. Even more it was a reaction to the catastrophe of that war, and then the Great Depression of the 1930s. Romania was no exception. I was struck



reading some articles in Romanian journals of the 1920s how influential the pessimism of Oswald Spengler was. There was also the growing antagonism toward ethnic minorities. And finally, of course, the rise of European fascism that reached its height in 1933 when Hitler took power contributed to the strengthening of Romania's far right. And that far right was resolutely hostile to Enlightenment liberalism.

What is astonishing is how many of Romania's most distinguished intellectuals fell for this, and promoted not just the far right but specifically Codreanu's Legionary movement. It wasn't just Nichifor Crainic (who like Herghelescu reconciled his religious ethno-nationalism with communist nationalism after his time in prison), Nae Ionescu, or Constantin Noica whose association with the Iron Guard was more or less temporary, but also the young Mircea Eliade who later would become internationally very famous. All of these, and many other well-educated intellectuals were seduced by what many historians have characterized as the most violent fascist movement in Europe after Nazism.

What was so appealing? Shouldn't they have known better? If anything united them it was this mystical ethno-nationalism that believed that there was something particularly noble and unique about Romanian blood. That blood carried its own culture. Therefore, foreign cultural influence, but even more mixture with impure and un-Romanian blood weakened national strength. As Katherine Verdery somewhat gently pointed out in her book *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania*, a very similar kind of nationalism came to be at the heart of late communism's attempt to legitimize itself. That narrowed the difference between fascism and communism, though to say this before 1989, or even today arouses quite a bit of angry rejection.

Believing that national culture and strength are tied to blood is not necessarily the same thing as wanting to commit genocide against the polluting elements in the nation, but it is a good first step in that direction. Gusti, Stahl, and at least a few other prominent intellectuals, including Comarnescu, were not fooled and steered clear of supporting the mystical, religious, racist, and violent elements gaining ground in Romania by the late 1930s and early 1940s. Most Romanian intellectuals did not resist and many sympathized with the far right.

During the academic year 1975-1976, when I was just starting at the University of Washington, Mircea Eliade came to give a lecture. It was a continuation of his life-long aim to diminish and ultimately discredit the Enlightenment. He talked about Isaac Newton, describing him as more of a religious mystic who considered his alchemy and religious obsessions as more important than his scientific breakthroughs. Eliade was a careful scholar, and what he had to say was not entirely wrong. But as with many other aspects of his career,

including his most famous writings about religion, and the distortions of his experiences in India, the aim was to undermine faith in the liberal, scientific, modernizing Enlightenment. After his lecture I went up to him and told him that I was a friend of Henri Stahl. He looked embarrassed, asked how Stahl was, and turned away to talk to someone else. He understood immediately that I knew things about his past that he had carefully concealed at the University of Chicago. The point was that unlike some others, most notably Emil Cioran, Eliade never repented.

This leads to my second and concluding thought. It is not just that Enlightenment liberalism proved to be very vulnerable in Europe, and much of the world in the 1930s. The fact is that today the same thing is happening right here in this region of East-Central Europe, and in Europe as a whole, and elsewhere in the world, including in the United States which, in the 1940s, was the country that saved democracy and the humanistic side of the Enlightenment. If in America, in England, and in Western Europe the Enlightenment's belief in free thought, in democracy, and in the defense of individual human rights is under threat, where is rescue going to come from? What if this time America is no longer available? It isn't China that is going to take over that role.

Why has this happened? Part of the reason has been the unrelenting attack against liberalism from both the left and the right, and therefore the failure of educational systems in the West to teach the history of that struggle over many centuries. It was, after all, the Enlightenment that emancipated humanity from its oppressive past.

To go back to the 1920s and 1930s it was not that young intellectuals in Romania, or elsewhere created fascist tyranny on their own, but that they were prepared to legitimize it, to spread its ideas, and to teach a new generation of intellectuals to do the same in large part because they had abandoned faith in the Enlightenment.

It was the same with communist intellectuals, though throughout most of Europe there were far fewer of these before World War II than afterward when the far right was temporarily discredited, and in the West, particularly in France and Italy, a whole new generation of anti-Enlightenment intellectuals turned to communism.

By understanding better how the Enlightenment was largely rejected here in Romania, and elsewhere in Europe can help us get a clearer understanding of why it could happen again.

I am not suggesting that the world geo-political or economic conditions are the same as in the 1930s. Rather, I am saying that some of the same distrust of liberal humanism is at work. In the coming political and economic crises that will occur, in the face of continuing rapid disruptive social change, the spread of anti-Enlightenment, anti-Western, anti-liberal, and anti-democratic ideologies is certain to generate new

neo-fascist movements and perhaps even regenerate an equally illiberal far left.

This should not be. We know what happened as a result of such developments in the twentieth century. We cannot predict future political events, but we can be sure if we do not pay attention to the consequences of the spread of counter-Enlightenment sentiments we will experience another set of terrible disasters.

What can we do as academics, as teachers, as writers? Few of us ever get the kind of political power that would make a direct difference. But for those in the humanities and social sciences, we can look back and try to understand why some intellectuals resisted, why others did not, and what we can do to give more support to those who are fighting for the liberal Enlightenment. Then we can teach what we have learned, and prepare the young to take a stronger stand in that direction. That is not what everyone can or should do, but at least those of us engaged in the social sciences and humanities who study the modern world should.

It is now a platitude, but nevertheless true that the famous quote from George Santayana is apt: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

About 20 years ago I began to understand this, rather late in my career. Since then I have tried to explore the meaning of the Enlightenment, the reasons for its fragility, and the consequences of abandoning it. My most recent books have been about that, most obviously, the book called *The Shape of the New: Four Big Ideas and How They Made the Modern World* that I co-authored with a colleague. My newest book coming out soon, *You Say You Want a Revolution? Radical Idealism and Its Tragic Consequences* takes up some of the same thoughts about how to interpret history. There is something but not very much in each book about Romania. But now I recognize that it was from years of thinking and reading about Romania, and from the people I had known when I first came that I got many of my most general ideas. Much of that, it turns out, is applicable to the rest of the world too. It took me a long time to fully appreciate this, but now I do. For this I am very grateful to Romania.

